CCHD had cut funds to ACORN before campaign

BALTIMORE – The Catholic Campaign for Human Development cut off funding earlier this year to the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, known as ACORN, for reasons unrelated to the organization's current troubles over voter registration and partisan politics, reported the chairman of the U.S. bishops' subcommittee on CCHD.

In a report to the bishops Nov. 11 during their annual fall meeting in Baltimore, Auxiliary Bishop Roger P. Morin of New Orleans explained that CCHD, the U.S. bishops' domestic anti-poverty program that funds community development programs around the country, this summer suspended $1.13 million in previously authorized grants to ACORN affiliates.

No new applications from ACORN for the coming year were approved, he added.

ACORN has been under scrutiny in the last few months, most visibly for problems with its voter registration efforts. ACORN's voter registration programs in several states are being investigated after some of its workers were found to have made up names on registration forms. The false names were discovered before the forms were turned in to government entities.

But Bishop Morin explained that the CCHD action followed the revelation June 2 that Dale Rathke, the brother of ACORN founder Wade Rathke, had embezzled nearly $1 million from the organization and its affiliates in 1999 and 2000.

Dale Rathke stepped down from his position with the national organization in June when the matter became public; no charges were filed against him.

That revelation "raised questions about transparency and governance of ACORN," Bishop Morin told the bishops. CCHD commissioned a forensic audit to determine whether any of the church's funds had been stolen or used inappropriately. The final report of the auditors is still pending, but he said the work so far has concluded that "our funds were not involved with those embezzled at the national office."

Though financial accounting at the national level of ACORN was apparently flawed, the bishop said CCHD funds for local programs did reach the intended recipients.

Nevertheless, Bishop Morin said, “we thought it important” to remove ACORN affiliates from CCHD funding.

At a press conference following the session with the bishops, Bishop Morin said ACORN’s organization is so complex that “we couldn’t feel assured that we could vet all of (the individual affiliates) to be able to work with them.”

CCHD grants to ACORN affiliates have in the past funded local programs to create job opportunities and to combat low wages and crime, he said. Recent ACORN projects to receive CCHD funds included programs to improve housing opportunities for the poor and raise funds for Hurricane Katrina relief.

In response to questions at the press conference, Bishop Morin and Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, clarified that CCHD was created to help develop grass-roots projects for people to help their own communities, not to directly aid the poor. Charitable programs of the church are handled through other agencies, such as Catholic Charities.